DISILLUSIONMENT AT THE CAFFÈ FLORIAN: ISHIGURO'S *CELLISTS* AND THE DESTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines what Agamben calls the "destruction of experience"—the downgrading of lived experience as truth in favor of empirical knowledge in the modern world—as it manifests itself in Kazuo Ishiguro's short story *Cellists*, the final piece in his collection *Nocturnes* (2009). The first half of the paper examines how the narrative situates Tibor, the story's main character, within a complex set of symbols that reflect on the question of experience and repetition. Through the theoretical angle supplied by Agamben, I look at how the diminished status of lived experience in *Cellists* repeats familiar patterns from Ishiguro's other fiction, in particular his use of unreliable narrators and the ruthless utilitarianism of many of his American characters. The second half of the paper contemplates how this attitude produces a mood of disillusionment that is drawn, in particular, from the story's setting in the Caffè Florian in Venice, with Ishiguro borrowing this sentiment from a long tradition that includes Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, Honoré de Balzac's *Massimilla Doni*, and Thomas Mann's short story *Disillusionment*. By examining Ishiguro's short story in the context of these three texts, the paper looks at how Florian's has functioned repeatedly in the literary imagination as a site of reflection on the nature of experience and disillusionment.

KEY WORDS: Kazuo Ishiguro, Nocturnes, Cellists, experience, Giorgio Agamben

Introduction

"The question of experience", writes Giorgio Agamben in the opening of *Infancy and History* (1978), "can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us" (Agamben 1993: 15). At first glance, such a claim seems extraordinary—was not the novel, for instance, that most modern of genres, inspired by the empirical philosophy in the seventeenth century, born to describe the experiences of everyday humanity with a depth and urgency that had never before been imagined? However, the "destruction of experience" (Agamben 1993: 15) that Agamben seeks to delineate, has a specific meaning, referring to the devaluation of lived experience, its importance forcibly repressed by the same moder-

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nity that produced the novel. The exploration of this peculiar historical condition lies at the heart of Kazuo Ishiguro's short story *Cellists*, the closing piece in his collection *Nocturnes* (2009), which plays off the naïveté of its Hungarian protagonist, Tibor, an aspiring young cellist, against the American "virtuoso" Eloise, who agrees to take him under her wing. Tibor's musical journey is a quest for experience that ends in disillusionment, as such journeys inevitably do, but Ishiguro's treatment of this theme contains a deeper reflection on the modern poverty of experience as explored not only through the story's revelations about Eloise's true status as a "virtuoso", but also in the author's decision to locate the story in Venice.

As a setting, Venice carries with it an immediate resonance that is derives from how its history has entered into the cultural imagination. Once the rich and powerful center of a flourishing empire, Venice fell into decline at the end of the middle ages from which it has never recovered. As such, Venice has become a longstanding symbol of decadence, a cautionary tale of squandered potential. This symbolism is reinforced by the physical peculiarities of the place: its labyrinthine streets, for instance, in which literary characters often find themselves hopelessly, metaphorically lost; the implication that the city's political and spiritual decline is reflected in its crumbling, empty palazzos, dwindling population, and the looming threat of being swallowed up by the sea; the spirit of debauchery that underlies customs like the annual *carnivale*, the last flickering embers of a vitality overtaken by the decadence of sensuality and death.

Venice, one might say, is a city that is synonymous with the beyond of the pleasure principle. Other British writers of Ishiguro's generation have repeatedly chosen this city as a backdrop for their own stories, both when he was a young writer, see, for instance, Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) and in more recent times, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* (2004), Iain Pears's *Stone's Fall* (2009), novels that use the Venetian setting in order to explore the darker sides of human desire. Venice's roots as a place of literary inspiration go far deeper than these immediate examples, of course, stretching back to such landmarks as Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) and Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), all the way back to Shakespeare's classic plays *Othello* (1604) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1605). Venice is not only a place of decadence, these stories reveal, but a location in which experience forces its characters (Aschenbach, Milly Theale, Othello, Shylock) to confront the inexorable reality of human mortality. Although *Cellists* at first appears to be an unassuming little tale, its underlying importance starts to emerge when the story is placed in the context of the glittering literary legacy to which its setting implicitly refers.

Ishiguro's story nonetheless requires that we narrow our focus a little, for its main setting is not just Venice, but a particular place in that city: the Caffè Florian, located in the Piazza di San Marco. Florian's, as it is more commonly known, has a rich history of its own that dates back to its establishment in 1720. Coinciding with the growing popularity of coffee in Europe in the eighteenth century, Florian's has long served as a cultural rendezvous for many of the world's greatest talents:

> Throughout the centuries, the Florian has been a meeting place for the leaders of all the arts. The Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni (1707-93) was a regular, as was Antonio Canova (1757-1822). Stendhal learned here of the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. Wagner chose the upper floor to listen to his music being played below. Madame Récamier, Cheateaubriand, Alfred de Musset, George Sand and the Goncourt brothers visited from France; Charles Dickens, John Ruskin and Robert Browning from England. (Fitch 2006: 139)

Not surprisingly, then, Florian's also appears in a number of stories by well-known writers. In Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888), for instance, the narrator escapes the summer heat by eating ices at Florian's, later bringing Miss Tina, the woman he is trying to manipulate in order to get a hold of Aspern's letters, to this location in order to flatter and entertain her. In Honoré de Balzac's story *Massimilla Doni* (1837-39), Florian's is the social hub of the city, the place people go to discover the hidden secrets of other people's lives, fueled by an intense mixture of gossip and caffeine. Most important to Ishiguro's piece is Thomas Mann's early short story *Disillusionment*, published in 1896, in which the narrator recalls an incident at Florian's in which he recalls his first feelings of disillusionment with the world. Florian's functions in all these texts as the epitome of the modern paradox of experience, a place that is rife with commotion and gossip, a whirlwind of apparent activity that nonetheless repeatedly fails to translate back into authentic experience, and it is into this celebrated milieu that Ishiguro chooses to insert his own story.

Cellists: The Destruction of Experience

Cellists is related by an unnamed first-person narrator, a musician living and working in Venice, whose friendship with the protagonist, Tibor, is couched in a barrage of symbolism designed to remind the reader of the relentless circularity of human experience: the repetitive task of a musician playing in a Venetian café, performing the same songs over and over again, the "first hint of an autumn wind" (Ishiguro 2009: 189) that recalls the rhythmic cycle of the seasons, and the narrator's nostalgic idea of his fellow musicians "as a kind of family" (Ishiguro 2009: 190) who, in a recurring pattern, leave him in order scatter across Europe to play in other "squares and cafes you'll

never visit" (Ishiguro 2009: 190). The story thus reiterates the repetitive nature of human experience, where superficial changes occur but the basic scenario never really alters. Even Tibor is presented as an apparent cliché, the familiar type of a talented and well-trained musician upon whom less privileged but more experienced colleagues look with a mixture of jealousy and sympathy. "[T]hey liked to take the Tibors of this world under their wing"—writes Ishiguro, as though Tibor were a type rather than a unique individual—"look after them a little, maybe prepare them for what lay ahead, so when the disappointments came they wouldn't be quite so hard to take" (Ishiguro 2009: 191). *Cellists* thus sets up the reader's expectations in a strategic way, leading us to anticipate a familiar, well-worn story about innocence and disillusionment that has been told a million times over. The exact details might vary, the names and faces might be different, but the essence of the tale is always more or less the same. It is the ability to recognize this repetitive pattern, to become familiar with its rules, complexities, and variations, that we call by the name of "experience".

In the modern world, argues Agamben, we have become suspicious of this kind of lived experience, eyeing it with distrust even though it is inexorably a part of our own selves. Again, such a claim may seem unusual given the wealth of philosophical ideas about the realm of human experience. Martin Jay undertakes an erudite survey of this term's evolution in modern thought in *Songs of Experience* (2005), for instance, focusing mainly on conceptions of experience from the Enlightenment and beyond. Mary Poovey, in *A History of the Modern Fact* (1998), provides further insights into the discursive tools that have shaped the modern idea of experience. The modern fact, recounts Poovey, is distinguished from the ancient fact by its immersion in a larger *system* of knowledge, in contrast to the Aristotelian notion of "'facts' in the sense of nuggets of experience detached from theory" (Daston in Poovey 1998: 8). This revolution in experience is seen as influencing the roots of modern fiction, an argument famously made by Ian Watt in his seminal study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957):

> Modern realism [...] begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke, and received its first full formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century. But the view that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it, obviously does not in itself throw much light on literary realism [...] What is important to the novel in philosophical realism is much less specific; it is rather the general temper of realist thought, the methods of investigation it has used, and the kinds of problems it has raised. (Watt 2001: 12)

Despite some challenges, the core of Watt's thesis remains the critical consensus among theorists of the novel. In *How Novels Think* (2005), for in-

stance, Nancy Armstrong reaffirms the link between Locke's idea of a human subjectivity formed through the accumulation of empirical experience through her reading of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the prototype of the modern novel insofar as it initiates an approach to subjectivity that Armstrong claims marks all subsequent novels: "the presupposition that novels think like individuals about the difficulties of fulfilling oneself as an individual under specific cultural historical conditions" (Armstrong 2005: 10). The novel is thus inextricably tied, it seems, to the realm of human experience.

Given the wealth of theories about modern experience, and the rise of the novel as a means of exploring it, how then can we say, paradoxically, that Ishiguro's story expresses an attempt to address the modern *destruction* of experience? The answer lies in the historical split that occurs with the advent of the scientific revolution. In *Infancy and History*, Agamben argues that western philosophical thought once observed a distinction between factual knowledge and lived experience that has since been destroyed. "[T]he expropriation of experience was implicit in the founding project of modern science", he writes, "[A]gainst repeated claims to the contrary, modern science has its origins in an unprecedented mistrust of experience as it was traditionally understood" (Agamben 1993: 19). The scientific method insists on discovering truth by *subtracting* the individual from the site of the experiment, "displacing experience as far as possible outside the individual on to instruments and numbers", a shift that has had the effect of removing cultural value and authority from discourses grounded in lived experience (Agamben 1993: 20). The notion of "experience" referred to by the aforementioned theorists, therefore, refers to a historically peculiar kind of Enlightenment experience that is rooted exclusively in scientific knowledge, for the "idea of experience as separate from knowledge has become so alien to us that we have forgotten that until the birth of modern science experience and science each had their own place" (Agamben 1993: 20). The rise of empiricism means that scientific knowledge has become the only basis for "valid" experience. Lived experience continues to exist, of course, but it has lost the authority to speak with the voice of truth. The power of lived experience lies in "the power of words and narration; and no one now seems to wield sufficient authority to guarantee the truth of an experience" (Agamben 1993: 16).

The inherent paradox of this shift in cultural attitude toward experience is that humans cannot, in practice, live their everyday lives according to the principles of the scientific method. Whereas a scientific experiment is predicated on the possibility of repetition, a human life is inescapably singular and so cannot be undone or relived. This degradation in the value of lived experience, as such, puts humanity in conflict with the very conditions of its

own existence, a situation that speaks to the very heart of Ishiguro's fiction. Unreliable narrators, for instance, are a recurrent feature of his novels, an unreliability that is rooted in the modern distrust of everyday experience. Etsuko, the protagonist of *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), is a narrator whose emotional traumas overlay and distort her account of past events so strongly that the reader cannot help but suspect their authenticity. "It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time", she says at one point, "that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today" (Ishiguro 1990a: 41).

Masuji Ono in *An Artist of the Floating Word* (1986) and Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* (1989) are both in denial, amongst other things, about the fact that they helped the wrong side in World War II, so that their accounts are full of evasions and denials that undermine the trust of the reader. Ishiguro's later novels push this unreliability in new directions: his experimental novel *The Unconsoled* (1995), for instance, appears to blend the emotional and physical landscape of its protagonist, Ryder, so that it becomes impossible to tell what is factual and what is imagined; the "detective" novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) is superficially an investigation into the disappearance of the protagonist's missing parents, a pretext that allows Ishiguro to examine the emotional wounds of a colonized world, a theme to which he returns in his fantasy novel *The Buried Giant* (2015); while *Never Let Me Go* (2005) tricks the reader into believing, at first, that they are reading a realistic story set in a typical English school, only to discover gradually that the real context of the story is a dystopian alternative reality where clones are harvested for their organs. The reader of Ishiguro's fiction is thus constantly caught in a narrative hall of mirrors, forced to follow the thread of a story that, grounded in the narrator's lived experience, seems unreliable, but without there being any alternative path to follow.

The unreliability of Ishiguro's narrators and his fascination with the theme of experience thus constitutes an implicit challenge to the assumptions of the modern subject of knowledge. In an early interview, for instance, Ishiguro talks about how little he cares for empirical details, choosing instead to reinvent even the real places that appear in his novels, such as the portrayal of Japan in his first two novels. "I am not essentially concerned with a realist purpose in writing", he says, "I just invent a Japan which serves my needs" (Shaffer and Wong 1998: 8-9). What matters instead is the lived, emotional experience of his characters, a context that goes to the heart of who we are as human beings and yet, as Agamben observes, has lost its prestige and authority due to the rise of the empirical subject. This undervalued realm of the personal in Ishiguro's fiction is echoed in the practice of art, which becomes a kind of barometer of a human being's emotional health. In *A Pale View of Hills*, for instance, Niki, who later tragically

commits suicide, recalls the dreary piano lessons she was forced to take which "put me off music for life" (Ishiguro 1990a: 52), while Etsuko, her mother, later reflects on the violin she used to play, how she "used to be so devoted to the instrument [...] [b]ut I hardly touch it now" (Ishiguro 1990a: 57). At Hailsham, the school in *Never Let Me Go*, the implied connection between art and the meaning it accords to human existence is so strong that the children imagine a mythical Gallery where their art is put on display. "The gallery Tommy and I were discussing was something we'd all of us grown up with", Ishiguro writes. "Everyone talked about it as though it existed, though in truth none of us knew for sure that it did" (Ishiguro 2006: 31). When the school attempts to present the children's art as a legal verification that they are more than just biological reserves to be harvested, this evidence of the childrens' humanity is ultimately dismissed as not being compelling enough. Lived experience, as well as the art through which it expresses itself, have lost their cultural value and authority.

Across his fiction, Ishiguro singles out American culture as particularly affected by this functionalization of modern experience. Americans are thus repeatedly linked in Ishiguro's writings with a virulent form of modernity that, while narcissistically emphasizing the primacy of its own experiences, has little respect for or understanding of other cultural traditions already in existence. The opening scenes of *The Remains of the Day*, for instance, see Darlington House bought by an American, Mr. Farraday, who makes a joke about Stevens, the butler, receiving a letter from a woman (the insinuation being that it is some kind of love letter). "This was a most embarrassing situation, one in which Lord Darlington would never have placed an employee", recounts Stevens. "But then I do not mean to imply anything derogatory about Mr Farraday; he is, after all, an American gentleman and his ways are often very different" (Ishiguro 1990b: 14). Just how different is visible in Ishiguro's first two novels, in which America is represented as both an exemplar of modernity and a colonial master. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, for instance, Ono says that "we might be a little too hasty in following the Americans" because while "many of the old ways must now be erased for ever", he worries that "sometimes some good things are being thrown out with the bad" (Ishiguro 1989: 185). Taro, his son-in-law, replies that the "Americans have an immense amount to teach us" about "such things as democracy and individual rights" (Ishiguro 1989: 185). Ishiguro depicts Americans as symbols of a modernity that possesses little respect or understanding for the subtleties of tradition, and as such they are able to reinvent themselves with breathtaking ruthlessness. This latter phenomenon is particularly visible in the other pieces from *Nocturnes*: *Crooner*, the opening story, tells the anti-romantic tale of Tony Gardner, a famous singer visiting Venice who is strategically divorcing his wife even though he loves her, simply be-

cause being single will heighten his chances of making a professional comeback, while the title piece *Nocturnes* reveals the subsequent story of how this wife, Lindy Gardner, in turn reinvents herself by having plastic surgery. In Ishiguro's fiction, Americans frequently represent the epitome of modernity's paradox, champions of the idealistic belief that you can be whatever you want to be, so long as that vision involves the brutal implementation of a utilitarian existence.

These ideas converge in *Cellists*, gathering together many of Ishiguro's most important themes. His critique of modernity, for instance, resurfaces in the form of Eloise McCormack, an American woman claiming to be a "virtuoso" when she takes Tibor under her wing. Eloise insists that under her mentorship she can transform Tibor from "just another well-trained mediocrity" (Ishiguro 2009: 196) to being a "virtuoso" like herself. Eloise talks of her high standards, her "sense of mission" (Ishiguro 2009: 197), and with her inspiring words and demanding habits Tibor finds that his cello playing does in fact improve. His suspicions are aroused, however, when his fellow musicians begin to ask him about Eloise's own proficiency on the cello, and he notices that Eloise neither carries a cello in her luggage nor is she willing to play one in his presence. When he eventually confronts her, Eloise admits that she "can't do it", not because she is a "fake", but that despite being "born with a very special gift" for playing cello she has never found the right teacher to develop it correctly (Ishiguro 2009: 212). Eloise's claim to be a "virtuoso" is ultimately based on an imaginary projection of her talents, a fantasy that is radically divorced from lived experience. It is this modern attitude, this ideology that you can be anything you want to be, which Ishiguro satirizes here. He is not being critical for the sake of it: the point of portraying characters like Eloise, on the contrary, is to show that humans can be so blinded by ideology that they are unable to acknowledge that actual experience places limitations on the reality of who we are and what we can do with our lives. Ishiguro returns to this point again and again in his fiction, repeatedly depicting characters who find themselves trapped in situations beyond their control, from the historical circumstances that ensnare Stevens in a web of regret in *The Remains of the Day*, to Ryder's emotional trauma in *The Unconsoled*, so strong that it distorts even his sense of reality, to the physical entrapment of Cathy and her friends in *Never Let Me Go*, who no matter what they make of their lives are doomed always to be little more than biological spare parts. The ambivalence of this mindset is a key component of Ishiguro's work, a modern opening onto a world of potential freedom that, in a perverse twist, can be turned into an excuse for avoiding the actual lived experience of reality.

Disillusionment at the Caffè Florian

But while *Cellists* connects in this way with the broader themes of Ishiguro's work, the story is also notable for the way it deploys the specific setting of Venice, particularly the Caffè Florian, and its resonance with earlier literary meditations on the destruction of experience. In contrast to the grander theme of Venice as a place of sensuality and decadence, the three aforementioned stories by James, Balzac, and Mann referencing Florian's constitute a narrower subset of ideas exploring the divergence between idealism and reality, expectation and experience, which speak, in turn, to the central concerns of Ishiguro's story. In *The Aspern Papers*, for instance, the reader is treated to an ironic contrast between the bitter, ugly figure of Miss Juliana Bordureau, whose greed and misanthropy are difficult for the narrator to reconcile with the "divine" poetry her youthful figure once inspired in his idol, the fictional American poet Jeffrey Aspern. "I was really face to face with the Juliana of some of Aspern's most exquisite and renowned lyrics", gushes James's narrator upon first meeting the old woman. "[A]s she sat there before me my heart beat as fast as if the miracle of resurrection had taken place for my benefit" (James 1986: 59). James repeatedly borrows religious language to describe this metamorphosis of everyday reality into transcendent art: Aspern is referred to a number of times as a "god" (James 1986: 46), a "divine poet" (James 1986: 47), with Juliana as his "muse" (James 1986: 78), the letters she owns are "sacred relics" (James 1986: 73), and even the homely Miss Tina undergoes a brief "transfiguration" (James 1986: 142) at the story's end. What resonates most, though, is the ambivalent tone that pervades this vocabulary, for while the reader never has any reason to doubt the authenticity of the narrator's admiration for Aspern and his work, James nonetheless infuses a deeper layer of irony into this language of wonder that reflects the narrator's underlying disillusionment: even though he thinks he has manipulated the Bordureau women at the outset, it is really they, in the end, who play him for a fool, extracting money from him without ever letting him actually see Aspern's letters.

This split between reality and ideal is also a recurring theme in Balzac's work, executed with precision in many of his best-known stories. Balzac, who was a major influence on James, is a master of downbeat, anti-climactic endings that are the result of his characters' closing sense of disillusionment: in *Sarrasine* (1830), a story made famous for modern readers by Roland Barthes's exhaustive dissection of it in *S/Z* (1970), the reader witnesses the conflict between Sarrasine's fantasy of what he imagines to be an ideal woman and the reality of what his object of desire, La Zambinella, really is; in *The Lily of the Valley* (1836), the narrator's melodramatic account of a woman he once loved and lost causes his current fiancée abruptly to call off their wedding at the novel's end when she realizes that their actual mar-

riage could never live up to his idealized fantasy of his former lover; in *The Wild Ass's Skin* (1831), Balzac's retelling of the Faust story, the protagonist Raphael discovers that the magical ability to get everything he could wish for ruins the possibility of gaining real happiness. In *Massimilla Doni*, Balzac's focus is on the division between spiritual (ideal) and sexual (actual) love. Emilio Memmi, the story's main male character, is torn between his non-sexual attachment to an unhappily-married woman, Massimilla Doni, and his carnal lust for a young singer, Clara Tinti (who, in a twist of fate, turns out to be the mistress of Massimilla's husband). Whereas a large part of the story takes place at the opera, where Massimilla and a visiting French doctor engage in an extended debate about life and art, music and passion, Balzac uses Florian's as a symbolic counterpoint to the ideal space of the operatic stage:

> The Café Florian at Venice is a quite undefinable institution. Merchants transact their business there, and lawyers meet to talk over their most difficult cases. Florian's is at once an Exchange, a green-room, a newspaper office, a club, a confessional—and it is so well adapted to the needs of the place that some Venetian women never know what their husband's business may be, for, if they have a letter to write, they go to write it there. Spies, of course, abound at Florian's; but their presence only sharpens Venetian wits, which may here exercise the discretion once so famous. A great many persons spend the whole day at Florian's; in fact, to some men Florian's is so much a matter of necessity, that between the acts of an opera they leave the ladies in their boxes and take a turn to hear what is going on there. (Balzac 1901: 283-4)

Emilio's physical lust for Clara even parallels his caffeine addiction—he drinks a cup of black coffee at Florian's every morning—an impulse so strong he compares it, at one point, to his best friend Vendramin's opium addiction. Balzac thus divides the space of his story in accordance with his themes, contrasting the artistic idealism of the opera, with its stilted but beautiful facsimile of life, to the gritty and complex real-life drama taking place at Florian's.

The association of Florian's with a place of worldly disillusionment is represented most strongly, out of these three examples, by Mann's short story—so strongly, in fact, that it could be regarded as the most obvious point of inspiration for Ishiguro's *Cellists*. Mann's early short story *Disillusionment* is best known today as the inspiration for Peggy Lee's *Is That All There Is*? which was a major hit in 1969—the song's enduring popularity is demonstrated by its choice as the closing music for the final episode of the recent TV series *Mad Men*. This overlap between literature and music fits Ishiguro's theme perfectly, given that *Nocturnes* explores this intersection through American popular music of the mid-twentieth century. Although it borrows extensively from Mann, however, the song itself, written by Jerry

Leiber and Mike Stoller, reinterprets the original story by placing the experience of disillusionment directly into the mouth of the narrator. Indeed, reflecting in *The L.A. Times* on the legacy of this great songwriting partnership following the death of Leiber in 2011, Randall Roberts writes:

> Wonderfully transparent about his inspirations, he [Leiber] didn't hide the fact, for example, that the words to Peggy Lee's 1969 hit *Is That All There Is?* were taken from a prose meditation by German writer Thomas Mann called *Disillusionment*. In Mann's story, after recounting the numbness of his life experiences, the narrator awaits the ultimate disappointment [...] Leiber used Mann's words nearly verbatim, but with one major difference. Mann dwells on futility until the very end. Leiber though to gave it an ironic twist that will echo long after his departure. If that's it, she sings, "Then let's keep dancing/ Let's break out the booze and have a ball/ If that's all there is." (Roberts 2011: np)

Roberts makes two small but important errors in this passage—that Mann's text is a "prose meditation" rather than a short story, and that the disillusioned man who does the bulk of the speaking is the narrator of the piece—which together lead to his larger error of conflating Thomas Mann the author with the sentiments and views of the literary character he creates. A closer look at the story, however, reveals something more complex.

The first thing to notice about Mann's text is that it begins in the first person—"I confess that I was completely bewildered..." (Mann 1972: 7)—but that this speaker is not the same character that Leiber and Stoller will later turn into the protagonist of their song. Instead, Mann opens *Disillusionment* with a frame narrative that sets up the lengthy invective about disillusionment, which is told by a second narrator (a device that Ishiguro similarly employs in *Cellists*). In both stories, this act of framing is used to create a distance between the author and his character. *Disillusionment* is not a "prose meditation" in the manner of Montaigne or Edison, as Roberts wrongly intimates, but a work of fiction in which, by the rules of hermeneutical exegesis, we may no more draw a direct line between Mann and his character than, say, between Shakespeare and Macbeth's final despairing soliloquy. To flatten the text in this way is to overlook the ironic twist that already exists in Mann's story, which is only made possible by the existence of the first narrator. The frame narrative, far from being an excuse to unleash the ensuing diatribe, provides a larger context in which to understand that speech. A careful reader should not, therefore, ignore its importance when trying to interpret the meaning of the story.

That the frame is often overlooked is not surprising when we consider the structure of Mann's story: the initial narrator's words occupy barely a page and a half, only to be eclipsed by the emotional power of the second narrator's speech, and Mann does not follow the convention of returning to

the frame at the story's conclusion. Yet if we look more closely at this section of the story, it is possible to discover some crucial clues that reshape how the reader is supposed to understand the second narrator's speech. Particularly important is the first narrator's description of the Piazza di San Marco, which is described in glowingly ideal terms: "Only a few people were abroad; but on the wide square the standards flapped in the light sea-breeze in front of that sumptuous marvel of colour and line which stood out with luminous enchantment against a tender blue sky [...] An incomparably blithe and festive sight" (Mann 1972: 7). Mann's language intimates that this narrator is not a hardened observer of the Venetian sights, but is taking everything in—including the appearance and words of the second narrator, "this extraordinary man" (Mann 1972: 7)—as a raw and new experience that, due to its novelty, makes a deep impression on him. This state of mind is reinforced by the initial words of his interlocutor as they sit together at Florian's: "You are in Venice for the first time, sir? [...] Does it come up to your expectations? Surpasses them, eh? You did not picture it as finer than the reality?" (Mann 1972: 8) Mann's two narrators are thus diametrically opposed: the first is raw, inexperienced, drinking in everything he sees with new eyes, whereas the second is world-weary and disillusioned. But therein lies the story's subtle twist, for in this confrontation it is the second narrator's worldview that, for the first narrator, comes across as "extraordinary" and "bewildering", an encounter that is so unusual and impressive for the initial narrator that he remembers every action, every detail, every word of the interaction. The second narrator's theme may be disillusionment, but Mann ironically *reverses* this dynamic by transforming the experience into something memorable in the mind of his first narrator, for whom the act of telling this story appears to be an attempt to come to terms with the astonishing scene he has witnessed.

Conclusions

This easily-overlooked double perspective in Mann's story leads us to reconsider, in turn, the narrative structure of *Cellists*. In both tales, the descriptive force of the main story distracts the reader from noticing the narrative that frames it. Yet this frame is crucial precisely because of the emotional value that the story of Tibor clearly possesses for the first narrator, so that the main narrative may be read as a displacement, an affective sublimation for this unnamed character. This move is a minor variation on Ishiguro's usual strategy, since he tends to use the consequences of repressed memory and emotion to achieve this effect. Whereas Ryder temporarily "forgets", for instance, that the hotel porter, Gustav, is his father-in-law in *The Unconsoled*, or Christopher Banks, despite being a famous detective, is unwilling to confront what really happened to his parents in *When We Were Orphans*, in *Cel-*

lists this internal alienation is externalized by the narrative double structure, with the account of Tibor's story functioning as the implicit symptom of some repressed issue in the life of the narrator that, as the story's conclusion demonstrates, remains unresolved. While the exact nature of this emotional wound is never specified, the source of the unspoken crisis is hinted at in the narrator's depiction of the musician's life as one of ephemeral repetition. The narrator's interest in Tibor initially arises from a sense that his example might be unique, a departure from the usual pattern, but by the story's end Tibor has started to look like just another cellist. The destruction of experience in modern life derives from this endless interchangeability, a condition that Martin Heidegger defines as the very meaning of inauthenticity. "Everyone is the other", he writes in *Being and Time* (1927), "and no one is himself" (Heidegger 2010: 124). Ishiguro thus demonstrates in *Cellists* how the Lockean notion that our characters are given their uniqueness by the variety of our experiences, an idea so essential for the development of the novel, has been subverted by the monotony of a modern world where we are condemned to wander endlessly through different but identical squares, sipping coffee and listening to the same music being played over and over again.

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